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ABSTRACT

A definition of bibliotherapy, who should conduct it, when and how it can be used, and some limitations are briefly addressed. Identification, catharsis, and insight are described as the three processes taking place in bibliotherapy. A list of techniques for accurately determining the needs of students, basic procedures in conducting bibliotherapy, and resources which include ERIC documents are included. (JW)

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BIBLIOTHERAPY. FACT SHEET.

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Bibliotherapy

Teachers daily encounter students who are struggling to cope with difficult situations—a death in the family, a broken home, poverty, rejection by peers, or physical handicaps. How to deal with such students is a question with no simple answer. For many teachers, the idea of intervening in the life of a troubled student is unpleasant, and they are reluctant to do more than suggest a visit to the school psychologist or counselor. Other teachers want to help, but are not sure how to proceed. For these teachers, especially reading and English teachers, bibliotherapy might be the answer.

What Is Bibliotherapy?

Simply stated, bibliotherapy is the use of books to help people solve problems. The idea is not new. For example, the ancient library at Thebes bore the inscription "The Healing Place of the Soul," while the Alexandria library displayed the words, "Medicine for the Mind." In nineteenth century America, books were used in several mental hospitals as a regular part of therapy, and in 1840 a library was established for inmates in New York's Sing Sing prison. However, the term "bibliotherapy" was not actually used until 1916, when Samuel McChord Crothers used it in an article appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly*.[1] The subject was dealt with in detail by Caroline Schrodes in an unpublished doctoral dissertation (1949),[2] and in an article (coauthored with D. H. Russell) in *School Review* (1950), in which bibliotherapy is defined as: "A process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature—interaction which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth."[3] Schrodes identifies three steps in the bibliotherapeutic process: identification, in which the reader associates himself or herself with a character or situation in a book; catharsis, in which the reader shares the feelings and motivations of the book's character; and insight, which takes place as the reader realizes that his or her situation can be dealt with more effectively by imitating or adapting the ideas from the reading material.[4]

Who Should Conduct Bibliotherapy?

Clearly, not every teacher is qualified to conduct bibliotherapy. Those who undertake to do so should possess certain personal qualities, including emotional stability, a genuine interest in working with others, the ability to listen, a willingness to learn about the community and its various ethnic groups, the ability to command respect and confidence, and the ability to empathize with others without moralizing, threatening, or commanding them. In addition, the teacher must have the skills to recognize the spiritual, emotional, and personal rights of others; establish both a healthy rapport and an honest relationship with them; function smoothly in social situations; and accept the student without prejudging, humiliating, or violating his or her feelings or need for privacy.[5]

When Should Bibliotherapy Be Used?

Bibliotherapeutic intervention may be undertaken for many reasons: to develop a student's self-concept, to increase or develop a student's understanding of human behavior or motivations, to help a student develop an honest self-appraisal, to provide a way for the student to find interests outside of self, to fulfill needs, to relieve emotional or mental pressures, to show a student that he or she is not the first or only person to encounter a problem, to show a student that there is more than one solution to a problem, to help a student discuss a problem more freely, and to help a student plan a constructive course of action in solving problems.[6]

Before undertaking bibliotherapy, a teacher must remember that it is more than just the casual recommendation of a certain book to a student—it is a deliberate course of action that requires careful planning. The first step in that planning is the determination of the true nature of a student's needs. For example, is the student whose mother has just died suffering from grief at the loss or from guilt at feeling no grief? Techniques for accurately determining the needs of a student include (1) observation, simply watching a student's reactions and behaviors and then comparing conclusions with others who know the student; (2) school records, which can reveal unseen physical problems, problems at home, or childhood experiences that may have left scars; (3) one-to-one conferences, conducted on a regular basis with each member of a class or for special purposes; (4) conferences with parents or guardians; and (5) carefully constructed writing assignments, especially journal writing, which can provide students with a means of revealing what is bothering them.[7]

How Should Bibliotherapy Be Used?

The second decision a teacher must make in preparing for bibliotherapy concerns the materials that are to be used. Here the teacher must exercise caution—just because a book deals with the problem in question does not automatically make it the proper choice for bibliotherapy. In fact, books can produce negative results. For instance, assigned to read about the virtuous benavior of a character in a similar situation, a student might interpret the assignment as a criticism of his or her failure to handle the same problem more successfully.[8] The book, then, should be carefully examined to determine that it provides a

fair picture of the problem, does not offer simple solutions to complex problems, and involves the reader in the solution to the problem. Another consideration is the literary merit of the book. A poorly written work—one that contains stereotypic characters, inconsistent plots, or unrealistic themes—will not only be of little value in bibliotherapy, but might also produce negative attitudes toward literature.

The third decision a teacher must make in preparing for bibliotherapy is whether to use the individual or the group approach. Individual therapy requires one-to-one sessions and is time consuming; however, it does offer the student the security of knowing that someone cares enough to listen. In addition, some students feel freer to express themselves in a one-to-one situation. However, if there are several students with the same needs or problems, group therapy can also be effective. The group approach allows students to share common experiences, thus lessening their anxieties. It can create a feeling of belonging and also can provide security to students who might feel uncomfortable in situations where they are singled out for special attention. Working in a group may lead a student to develop a different perspective and a new understanding of the problems of others.[9]

Regardless of whether the teacher chooses the individual or group approach, the basic procedures in conducting bibliotherapy are the same: (1) motivate the student or students with introductory activities; (2) provide time for reading the material; (3) allow incubation time; (4) provide follow-up discussion time, using questions that will lead the student or students from literal recall of information through interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of that information; and (5) conduct evaluation and direct the student or students toward closure. This involves both evaluation by the teacher and self-evaluation by the students.[10]

What Are the Limitations of Bibliotherapy?

A review of bibliotherapy research shows that bibliotherapy has been successfully used in changing attitudes toward minority groups, diminishing certain fears, helping students deal with death, and developing moral maturity.[11] It should not, however, be viewed as a panacea. Furthermore, its successes can be restricted by a variety of factors, including the student's readiness to see himself or herself in a mirror, the skill of the bibliotherapist, the materials used, the tendency of some students to rationalize away problems when reading about them, the tendency of some to use literature as an escape, and the relationship of the student and the therapist.[12] It is also important to note that bibliotherapy is not the answer to deep-seated emotional or mental problems; the teacher should, of course, refer students with such problems to the appropriate professionals. Bibliotherapy can, however, be a valuable means of helping students cope with some of life's difficulties.

Notes

1. Bernice J. Salup and Alane Salup, *Bibliotherapy: An Historical Overview* (Arlington, Va.: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 1981). [ED 200 496]

2. Caroline Schrodes, *Bibliotherapy: A Theoretical and Clinical-Experimental Study* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1949).

3. D. H. Russell and Caroline Schrodes, "Contributions of Research in Bibliotherapy to the Language-Arts Program," vol. 58 (September-October 1950), pp. 335-42, 411-20.

4. Joni Bodart, "Bibliotherapy: The Right Book for the Right Person at the Right Time—And More," *Top of the News*, vol. 36 (Winter 1980), pp. 183-188. [EJ 225 829]. See also, Schrodes, *Bibliotherapy: A Theoretical and Clinical-Experimental Study.*

5. Miriam Schultheis and Robert Pavlik, *Classroom Teachers' Manual for Bibliotherapy* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Benet Learning Center, 1977). [ED 163 493]

6. Schultheis and Pavlik, *Classroom Teachers' Manual for Bibliotherapy.*

7. Claudia E. Cornett and Charles R. Cornett, *Bibliotherapy: The Right Book at the Right Time. Fastback 151* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1980). [ED 192 380]

8. Gary A. Negin, "Bibliotherapy for the Atypical Reader," Wisconsin State Reading Association Journal, vol. 24 (September 1979), pp. 12-16. [ED 177 498]

9. Schultheis and Pavlik, *Classroom Teachers' Manual for Bibliotherapy.*

10. Cornett and Cornett, *Bibliotherapy: The Right Book at the Right Time.*

11. Joanne E. Bernstein, "Helping Young Children Cope with Separation: A Bibliotherapeutic Approach" (Paper presented at the third annual meeting of the Parents and Reading Conference, New York, New York, February 1978). [ED 170 695]

12. Cornett and Cornett, *Bibliotherapy: The Right Book at the Right Time.*

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Hunsinger, Paul. "The Educational Uses of Poetry Therapy." Arlington, Va.: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 1976. [ED 130 373]

Queen, Renee A. "A Mirror to My World—Stories to Ease the Pain." Arlington, Va.: ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 1976. [ED 126 465]

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Shachter, Jacqueline. "Self-Image Books as 'Soul Food'." Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1977. [ED 163 520]

Weinstein, Stuart H. "Bibliotherapy for Children: Using Books and Other Media to Help Children Cope." Paper presented at the annual conference of the Health Education Media Association, Miami, Florida, 1977. [ED 143 306]

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